

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

3 April 1968

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Hanoi's Motives

NOTE: This memorandum represents the conclusions arrived at after discussion by analysts from CIA, INR, and DIA.

1. Hanoi's move almost certainly does not forecast a change in its war aims, but the statement of 3 April is a significant departure in tactics. The North Vietnamese leaders have abandoned their adamantly-held position that there could be no official contacts at all before the bombing totally ceased.

2. There is one possible motivation which we would virtually rule out: while Hanoi may have been concerned by the mounting costs of an accelerated military effort, it was not constrained by inability to carry on the war. It may -- though we doubt that this was important -- have felt that the President had left himself free to carry out a major escalation of the conflict if the response was negative or long-delayed.

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3. The quickness of Hanoi's response suggests that it may already have decided, before the President's statement, to go over to "talk-fight" tactics if an opportunity offered itself during the winter-spring offensive. However this may be, we believe that DRV motives were (a) to assure themselves that the respite in bombing which they now have will continue, and hopefully to force the US to a complete cessation of all bombing of the North; (b) to exploit sentiment within the US in favor of ending the war, and if possible to lead the US Government to a point where US public opinion would not tolerate a reversal towards heightened conflict; (c) to intensify divisions between the US and the GVN; and (d) to accelerate disarray in Saigon and undermine the willingness of the South Vietnamese to fight.

4. It is possible that Hanoi read the President's statement as a decisive change in US policy -- an admission of unwillingness to continue the war, and a first step towards accepting the consequences. At least, from Hanoi's point of view, the situation in both the US and South Vietnam since Tet must seem much more vulnerable to talk-fight tactics, and to offer an opportunity for Hanoi to explore the possibilities of a settlement on terms favorable to it. For the North Vietnamese must, after all, be

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conscious of strains in their society arising from the war, as well as of the opportunities offered by the present situation.

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1. Hanoi's move may not mean much in solid substance. The North Vietnamese may simply demand the complete cessation of US bombing, under the old conditions. Nevertheless, they have altered the mode of delivering this demand in a fashion which is significant, being an apparent change from their previous refusal to meet the US at all before the bombing totally ceased.

2. There are two possible motivations which we would virtually rule out: (a) Hanoi was not constrained by inability to carry on the war; (b) it was not constrained by fear of the impact of world opinion if it made no move at all in response to the President's concession. It may -- though we doubt that this was important -- have felt that the President had left himself free to carry out a great escalation of the conflict if he received no response at all.

3. The quickness of Hanoi's response suggests that it may already have decided, before the President's statement, to go over to a talk-fight phase. However this may be, we believe that its motives were (a) to intensify divisions within the US on the war, and if possible to lead the US Government to a

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point of "talks" where US public opinion would not tolerate a reversal towards heightened conflict; (b) to intensify divisions between the US and the GVN; and (c) to produce disarray in Saigon and undermine the willingness to fight in South Vietnam.

4. It is just possible that Hanoi read the President's statement as a decisive change in US policy -- an admission that the war could not be won and a first step towards accepting the consequences. To us it seems unlikely that they would have come to this conclusion quickly enough to respond at the time they did. But surely, from Hanoi's point of view, the situation in both the US and South Vietnam has, since Tet, reached a highly vulnerable condition. By entering into talks of some duration, Hanoi probably expects to optimize the psychological impact of its military operations over the next few months.

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5. It follows from this that the initial position Hanoi will put forth in the "talks" will be a demand for complete cessation of bombing unaccompanied by any reciprocal act on their part. They will probably be willing to see the contact broken off at an early stage on this issue, calculating that pressures on the US to make the essential concession will mount. Yet they would probably still keep the channel open once established, and might make some unacknowledged but not irrevocable move to de-escalate at some point.

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